

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-20

INFO OCT-01 ADP-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-10 PA-03 RSC-01 PRS-01 SS-15 USIA-15

NEA-10 MC-02 RSR-01 /102 W
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R 261918Z JUL 73

FM AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6770

INFO AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO

C O N F I D E N T I A L PORT AU PRINCE 1262

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, HA

SUBJ: AFTERMATH OF FIRE IN NATIONAL PALACE ARMORY

REF: P-AU-P 1247

SUMMARY: SMOKE HAS CLEARED FROM NATIONAL PALACE ARMORY FIRE OF JULY 23 LEAVING GOH SEEMINGLY AS FIRMLY IN THE SADDLE AS EVER. REGIME LEADERS, ALTHOUGH EMBARRASSED BY FIRE, SEEM TO HAVE REACTED WELL TO THE ORDEAL, AND IF ANYTHING MAY HAVE STRENGTHENED THEIR POSITIONS SOMEWHAT AS A RESULT. HOWEVER, IF LOCAL WITCHHUNT IS LAUNCHED FOR POSSIBLE CULPRITS, OUTCOME COULD BE LESS HAPPY.

1. ATMOSPHERE IN PORT AU PRINCE FOLLOWING JULY 23 EXPLOSIONS AND FIRE IN NATIONAL PALACE AMMUNITION DEPOT CONTINUES NOTABLY CALM AND EVEN APATHETIC, SOMEWHAT SURPRISINGLY SO AFTER EXPLOSIONS FROM BURNING DEPOT REVERBERATED THROUGHOUT CITY FOR OVER SIX HOURS MONDAY MORNING AND SMOKE POURED FROM PALACE UNTIL MID-AFTERNOON. EMBASSY SOURCES HAVE HAD VERY LITTLE TO SAY ABOUT FIRE, BEYOND PASSING ON PREDICTABLE PLETHORA OF RUMORS THAT AFFAIR WAS NO ACCIDENT. ALTHOUGH MOST SOURCES SEEM INCLINED TO SUSPECT SABOTAGE, THERE IS NO CONSENSUS AT ALL ON POSSIBLE PERPETRATORS.

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2. RECALLING LAST PREVIOUS EXPLOSION OF NATIONAL PALACE AMMUNITION DEPOT IN 1912 WHICH BLEW UP FORMER PALACE AND PRESIDENT CINCINNATUS LECOMPTE ALONG WITH IT, MANY HAITIANS HAD LONG EXPECTED A RECURRENCE SOME DAY. NOW IT HAS FINALLY HAPPENED. CONTRARY TO PAST EXPERIENCE, HOWEVER, WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARED AWAY THIS TIME BOTH PALACE AND GOVERNMENT WERE STILL FIRMLY IN PLACE. THIS HAS NO DOUBT DISCOURAGED SOME WHO HAD HOPED FOR MORE DRAMATIC RESULTS, PERHAPS EXPLAINING THE LITTLE THEY HAVE HAD TO SAY SINCE JULY 23.

3. SO FAR AS WE CAN TELL, THE REGIME SEEMS TO HAVE REACTED WELL TO THE CRISIS, ITS SECOND THIS YEAR. THE GOVERNMENT MOBILIZED EFFICIENTLY, AND APPROPRIATE MEASURES WERE TAKEN TO COPE WITH THE SITUATION WITHOUT PANIC OR OVER-REACTION. SEVERAL EMBASSY SOURCES HAVE REMARKED ON SURPRISINGLY NORMAL ATMOSPHERE PREVAILING OUTSIDE PALACE GROUNDS DURING CRISIS, IN CONTRAST TO CRISES OF THE 1960'S WHEN SQUADS OF SOLDIERS AND MILITIAMEN ROAMED THE CITY AND NORMAL LIFE VIRTUALLY CEASED. ALTHOUGH GOVERNMENT LEADERS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN DEEPLY CONCERNED DURING FIRST HOURS OF EXPLOSIONS, BASICALLY THEY TREATED THE CRISIS AS ONE OF FIRE, NOT A POLITICAL OR SECURITY CRISIS. PRESIDENT'S 8:00 A.M. STATEMENT EXPLAINING FIRE AND URGING PEOPLE TO GO ABOUT NORMAL BUSINESS ALSO PROBABLY HELPED CALM APPREHENSIONS. IN AFTERMATH OF FIRE, EMBASSY AS YET HAS RECEIVED NO REPORTS OF ARRESTS OR INCREASED SECURITY MEASURES.

4. LOCAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES WHO WERE SUMMONED TO PALACE MONDAY MORNING TO RECEIVE PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT (WHILE EXPLOSIONS AND FIRE CONTINUED UNDER PALACE) ALL CONFIRM APPARENT CALM AND SELF-ASSUREDNESS OF PRESIDENT AND MADAME DUVALIER DURING CRISIS. ONE JOURNALIST SAID HE WAS PARTICULARLY IMPRESSED BY THE PRESIDENT'S MOTHER, WHO SAT COOLY FACING REPORTERS FOR OVER AN HOUR (WAITING FOR ELECTRICAL CURRENT TO BE CONNECTED FOR MICROPHONES) WHILE EXPLOSIONS ROCKED PALACE FROM LESS THAN 200 FEET AWAY. PRESIDENT DUVALIER WAS REPORTEDLY QUITE SELF-POSSESSED, BUT ANIMATED, TOO, AND HE ACTIVELY PARTICIPATED IN MANY PHASES OF EFFORT TO CONTROL FIRE.

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5. EMBASSY OBSERVERS NOTED THAT ALL HIGH MILITARY AND CIVILIAN OFFICIALS SEEMED TO BE IN PLACE AND WORKING AT APPROPRIATE DUTIES. ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF GENERAL CLAUDE RAYMOND (WHO DIRECTED FIRE FIGHTING), FOREIGN MINISTER ADRIEN RAYMOND AND INFORMATION MINISTER FRITZ CINEAS APPARENTLY WERE CLOSE TO THE DUVALIERS THROUGHOUT THE CRISIS. THEY WOULD SEEM TO HAVE STRENGTHENED THEIR

POSITIONS, FOR THE TIME BEING AT LEAST. PRESIDENTIAL GUARD COMMANDER GRACIA JACQUES, DESSALINES BATTALION COMMANDER BRETON CLAUDE, AND SECRET POLICE CHIEF LUC DESIR TOO WERE THERE IN THEIR USUAL SLOTS.

6. ORIGIN OF FIRE STILL UNKNOWN, BUT GOH MAY WELL PIN BLAME ON JULY 19 JORDANIAN ARMS SHIPMENT (REFTEL). IN THE END, FORMER INTERIOR MINISTER LUCKNER CAMBRONNE, WHO SET UP JORDANIAN ARMS SHIPMENTS LAST YEAR THROUGH AEROTRADE, INC. OF MIAMI, SEEMS MOST LIKELY SCAPEGOAT.

7. IN SUM, FIRE HAS TEMPORARILY EMBARRASSED REGIME, BUT AS YET THERE IS NO EVIDENCE IT HAS WEAKENED IT (EXCEPT FOR ACTUAL LOSS OF AMMUNITION). IT IS POSSIBLE THAT BY WEATHERING CRISIS AS WELL AS IT SEEMS TO HAVE, REGIME MAY EMERGE SOMEWHAT STRENGTHENED FOR A TIME, MUCH AS IT EMERGED FROM KNOX KIDNAPPING ORDEAL. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF GOH SHOULD LAUNCH WITCHHUNT FOR CULPRITS AMONG MILITARY PERSONNEL, PARTICULARLY IN THE PRESIDENTIAL GUARD, WHICH HAD CHARGE OF AMMUNITION DEPOT, OUTCOME OF JULY 23 COULD BE LESS HAPPY FOR REGIME.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ARSON, UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 26 JUL 1973
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: golinofr
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1973PORTA01262
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS CORCORAN
Errors: N/A
Film Number: n/a
From: PORT AU PRINCE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1973/newtext/t1973079/aaaaagob.tel
Line Count: 137
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: golinofr
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 23 JAN 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <23-Jan-2002 by boyleja>; APPROVED <11 FEB 2002 by golinofr>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: AFTERMATH OF FIRE IN NATIONAL PALACE ARMORY
TAGS: PINS, HA
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005